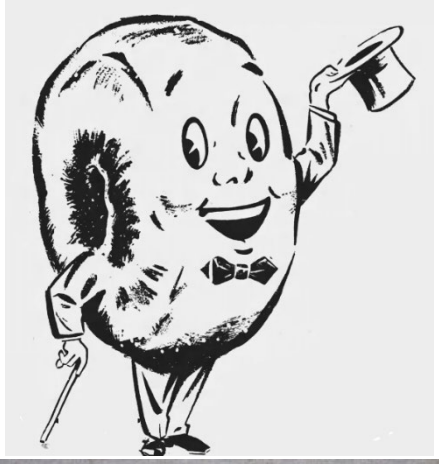
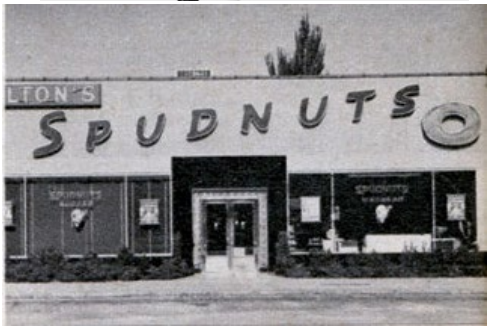
SPUDNUTS:

A HISTORY OF THE POTATO PASTRY IN THE TRI-CITIES

By Donald Sorenson, Vintage Tri-Cities





Top: Mr. Spudnut as he would appear in ads from the 1950's. Bottom: General Office of Pelton's Spudnts in Salt Lake City, UT

For over 76 years there's been one place in the area synonymous with delicious treats which are enjoyed by locals from Hanford to Finley. From one small, unassuming shop in Richland's Uptown Shopping Center, the Spudnut Shop has churned out more pastries than anyone can count. Most believe they know the history of Spudnuts in the Tri-Cities, but you'll soon discover there is more to the story that you realized.

Spudnuts were the brainchild of Al and Bob Pelton of Salt Lake City, Utah. Al, an appliance salesman, and Bob, a drugstore clerk, loved donuts and were interested in getting into the donut business in 1940. They didn't want to just sell donuts; they wanted to create a new kind of donut. Between the two they came up with $75 cash and rented a small store on the corner of 400 South and 500 East in Salt Lake City to work on their formula.Inspired by potato-based pasties Bob enjoyed while serving overseas in the Navy during the 1930's, the brothers were determined to create their own version.

Their first formula consisted of dough flavored with potato water, which was a failure. After more experimentation, the brothers tried mashed potato-based donuts, which turned out looking golden brown and smelling wonderful. Upon sharing samples with friends and family who overwhelmingly approved, the Pelton's donut business was off and running.

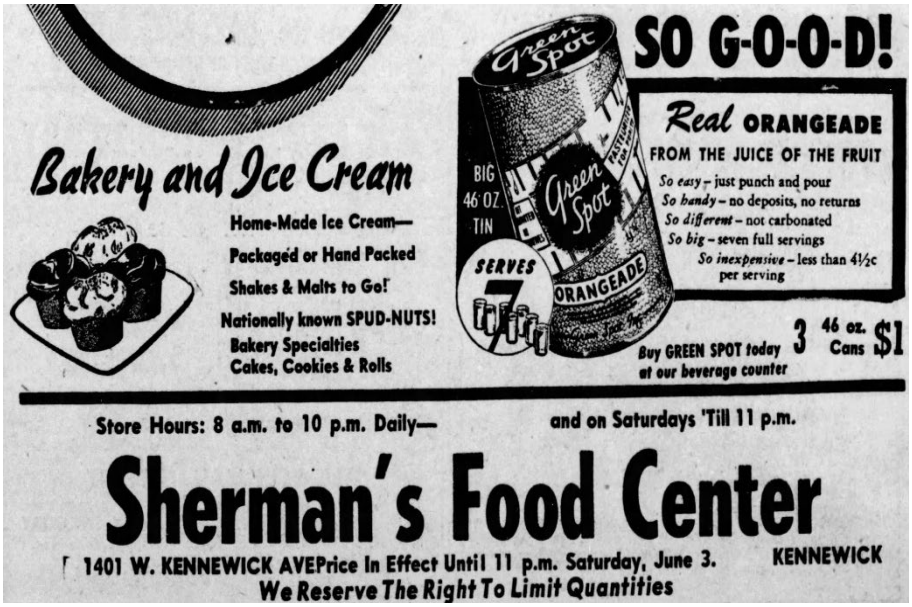
The Richland Uptown Spudnuts as it appeared shortly after Ghirardo and Bell moved from the Richland Y in 1950.

The Pelton's knew their product needed and deserved a name other than "donut". The brothers came up with the term "Spudnuts" and from that day forward made sure everyone knew they weren't just ordinary donuts, they were Spudnuts! The public went wild over the new product. Soon, the brothers developed a dry potato mix which eliminated the need to peel and mash thousands of potatoes. With demand growing beyond what they could have ever expected, the brothers started working on selling Spudnuts franchises in 1946.

When Barlow Ghirardo and Jerry Bell purchased their Spudnut franchise for $50 plus the cost of 100 bags of Spudnut flour in 1948, they knew they were joining one of the fastest growing chains in the United States at the time. Spudnuts franchises were popping up all over the country adding new locations every week. At its peak, there were more than 500 Spudnut shops in 42 states as well as in Canada. The company liked to say, "…Coast to coast…Alaska to Mexico."

Originally located in the Richland Y area, Ghirardo and Bell ran Spudnuts mainly as a wholesale business, supplying local grocery stores like Sherman's Food Center in Kennewick. When construction for the highway between Kennewick and Richland started in 1950, the two moved their business to the newly opened Uptown Shopping Center in March 1950. The community embraced the move and Spudnuts became one of the most popular businesses in the center.

With Spudnuts still rapidly expanding across the country, Ghirardo and Bell would not be the exclusive sellers of Spudnuts in the area for long.


SO G-O-O-D!
Bakery and Ice Cream
Home-Made Ice Cream—
Packaged or Hand Packed
Shakes & Malts to Go!
Nationally known SPUD-NUTS!
Bakery Specialties
Cakes, Cookies & Rolls
Green Spot
BIG 46 OZ. TIN
SERVES 7
ORANGEADE
Real ORANGEADE
FROM THE JUICE OF THE FRUIT
So easy – just punch and pour
So handy – no deposits, no returns
So different – not carbonated
So big – seven full servings
So inexpensive – less than 4½c per serving
Buy GREEN SPOT today at our beverage counter
3 46 oz. Cans $1
Store Hours: 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Daily— and on Saturdays 'Till 11 p.m.
Sherman's Food Center
1401 W. KENNEWICK AVE
Price In Effect Until 11 p.m. Saturday, June 3.
KENNEWICK
We Reserve The Right To Limit Quantities

This Sherman Food Center ad from the June 1, 1949 edition of the Tri-City Herald touts Spudnuts for sale, most likely supplied by Ghirardo and Bell's Spudnut wholesale business, then still located in the Richland Y area.

Meet Mr. Spudnut!
America's Finest Food Confection!
Come!
JOIN THE FUN!
926 W. LEWIS
OPENING TOMORROW! ANOTHER NEW & BEAUTIFUL
SPUDNUT SHOP
Saturday, March 31
FREE SPUDNUTS & COFFEE - - 2 P.M. TO 4 P.M.
Be our guest as another beautiful SPUDNUT Shop opens! It's Free Spudnuts and Coffee "on the house" — from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. tomorrow! See SPUDNUTS made . . . taste their tantalizing golden goodness — and only then will you understand how honestly delicious . . . how DIFFERENT they are! Spudnuts are compounded with care to a secret formula, cooked at an exact temperature to a rich, golden brownness, then, gently glazed, sugared or chocolate-iced — truly, an exciting new eating delight for every member of the family! But — take a dozen home, and see for yourself!
FREE MR. SPUDNUT HATS TO THE KIDDIES!
Spudnuts
Now in PASCO
926 W. LEWIS
. . . COAST TO COAST . . . ALASKA TO MEXICO
Spudnuts . . . a tasty Pelton Pastry Product, sold only in the genuine Mr. Spudnut bag, by authorized, franchised dealers. Home office: Pelton Spudnuts, Inc., 1488 South State, Salt Lake City, Utah.

The Pasco Spudnuts grand opening announcement in the March 30, 1951 edition of the Tri-City Herald.

In the February 21, 1951 edition of the Tri-City Herald, it was announced that Donald Lamberto and Gordon Pryce, both of Richland, were awarded a Spudnuts franchise which would open at 926 West Lewis St. in Pasco. The two men, who both trained as Navy pilots at the Pasco Naval Base and stayed in the area after the war, worked at the Hanford Site for General Electric.

Opening on March 31, 1951, the Pasco location advertised a new creation called a "spud-over", which was like an apple fritter. Handing out "Free spuddies and coffee and Mr. Spudnut hats to the kids", Pasco residents were excited for a Spudnuts of their own.

The Spudnuts expansion didn't stop there; the following year in April 1952, siblings Eileen Capello and Dale Staley opened a Kennewick location at 119 First Ave. In the Tri-City Herald article announcing the opening, Staley states, "Except for physical appearance, Spudnuts have no relation whatsoever to other similar shaped products. Spudnuts are a special blend of the finest wheat flower, powdered whole eggs, specially prepared potatoes from which the Spudnut name is taken, milk solids, and other vital ingredients – all mixed and blended perfectly to the secret Pelton formula."

Staley, as well as the owners of the Pasco location, heavily promoted their stores in the Tri-City Herald. Almost daily, ads would appear for the two locations, sometimes as a combined effort to advertise new products such as "Spudnut Buttons and Bows" which were topped with coconut and a maraschino cherry and the Spudnut Persian a cinnamon type Spudnut still served today at the Richland location.

The Kennewick and Pasco Spudnuts ran ads over the years to attract customers. Ultimately both locations struggled to keep in business, with the Kennewick shop closing in 1955.

During the early 1950's the Spudnut brand was humming along across the Tri-City area. However, in 1955 the landscape for the product started to change. While Ghirardo and Bell had stable business over in Richland, the two other Spudnut Shops faced various struggles. In February 1955, the Pasco location was put up for sale, followed by the Kennewick location 4 months later. While the Pasco shop found a buyer in Raymond Layton, the Kennewick shop, which was being sold due to an illness in the owner's family, never sold and went out of business. If anyone from Kennewick was missing their Spudnut fix, they were forced to look towards Pasco or Richland.

Another New and Beautiful
Spudnut Shop
FORMAL OPENING TOMORROW
SATURDAY, APRIL 5
FREE Spudnuts AND COFFEE - 2 to 4 p.m.
Come and be our guest as another beautiful Spudnut Shop opens . . . it's free Spudnuts and Coffee "on the house" from 2 to 4 p. m. tomorrow! You'll see genuine Spudnuts made, you'll taste their tantalizing goodness — and, then, you'll understand how delicious, how honestly DIFFERENT Spudnuts are! An exciting eating delight for every member of the family . . . made of finest ingredients to a secret formula . . . fluffy as a cloud, energy-packed, digestible! No wonder Spudnuts are America's Finest Food Confection. Come and join the fun!
And ask about these exciting Spudnut Pastry Varieties
Spudnut BUTTONS & BOWS 6¢ EA.
Spudnut PERSIANS 6¢ EA.
Spudnut BISMARKS 6¢ EA.
Spudnut SPUD-OVERS 15¢
POST
Spudnuts
TRADE MARK
COAST TO COAST - ALASKA TO MEXICO
AND NOW IN KENNEWICK
119 FIRST AVE.
Spudnuts, Spud-Overs and other Spudnut Pastry Products are made only by authorized franchised dealers. Look for the genuine Mr. Spudnut Bag or Box. Home office: Pelton's Spudnuts, Inc. 1488 South State, Salt Lake City

Much like the Pasco Spudnuts grand opening a little over a year earlier, Mr. Spudnut was on hand to take photos with the kids as well as hand out free Spudnuts and coffee to those in attendance.

Over the next 9 years, both remaining locations were involved in their respective communities. Each would sponsor Little League teams in both cities. During that time Pasco Spudnuts was the main sponsor of Pasco Little League Baseball. The Richland shop routinely supplied prizes for various activities and contests around town. It appeared as if both shops were on solid ground. That would soon change, both for the local shops as well as Spudnuts as a national brand.

By the mid-1960's, Bob Pelton had his eyes on retirement and sold his half of the business to his brother. Al Pelton would sell the business in 1968 to National Oven Products who in turn sold it to Dakota Bake-N-Serv 3 years later. Being more interested in the infrastructure and distribution channels the Pelton brothers built, Bake-N-Serv allowed the Spudnut brand to go by the wayside, causing the network of Spudnut shops to shrink from 500+ shops down to around 300.

Back in the Tri-Cities, due to financial struggles as well as marital strife and eventual divorce, Raymond Layton listed the Pasco Spudnuts for sale in June 1964. Layton found a buyer the following January and sold the business for $2000 to L.W. Magnuson. Less than a year later, Magnuson himself listed the business for sale. Jerry Watson would purchase the business from Magnuson for $3100 in January 1966. His ownership would only last 6 months before he too decided to leave the Spudnut business listing the franchise for sale.

It seemed Pasco would join Kennewick as a former Spudnut town. If the Pasco Spudnuts was going to survive, the new owner would need both the experience and knowledge to turn things around to ensure the business would thrive. That man was none other than Jerry Bell, the co-owner of the original Richland Spudnut location.

Originally from Montana, Gerald Richard 'Jerry' Bell graduated from the University of Montana with a degree in business. He joined the Air Corps during World War 2 as a flight instructor. He moved to the Tri-Cities in 1948 with his family to open the Spudnuts Shop with Ghirardo. Bell, who was also a talented musician, had a band called the Belltones that played in various places around town during the 50's and 60's. When presented with a chance to acquire his own Spudnut Shop, Bell purchased the business from Jerry Watson. The first move Bell made would be to relocate from the Lewis St. location to 111 N 3rd Ave. Once his new shop was set up, Bell held a grand reopening on October 22nd, 1966, offering free coffee and Spudnuts to all who stopped by. Bell put his 20+ years in the Spudnut business to work, turning the floundering Pasco franchise into a successful one.

With Bell at the helm in Pasco and Ghirardo holding steady in Richland, both Spudnut Shops thrived in their little corners of the world. However, in October 1971 Spudnuts would make its triumphant return to Kennewick with the opening of the Spudnuts Drive-In at 714 W Imnaha (Now Columbia Drive). The new shop owners, Bob George and Ken Allen, played hosts for the grand opening weekend where the customary free donuts and coffee was handed out. The unique thing about the new Kennewick location was their drive-thru window, making Spudnuts on the go a breeze. They also served a new creation called the "Spudnut Burger" which they offered with fries and a drink called an "Orange Rufus". Spudnuts were once again the treat of choice in each of the Tri-Cities!

GRAND OPENING
UNDER NEW OWNERSHIP OF
JERRY BELL
SPUDNUT SHOP
111 N. 3rd AVE. PASCO 547-8662
(FORMERLY LOCATED ON WEST LEWIS ST. IN PASCO)
SATURDAY
OCTOBER 22nd
THE WELCOME MAT IS OUT
FREE! FREE! FREE! FREE!
FREE COFFEE
all day Sat.
FREE SPUDNUTS
To The Kiddies When Accompanied By An Adult.
We Feature:
Soup and sandwich lunches every day! Specials on lunches. Fountain treats.
Open 4 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mon. thru Sat.
Closed Sundays

Jerry Bell's new Spudnut Shop as advertised in the October 21, 1966 Tri-City Herald. Other businesses also posted ads in the paper congratulating Bell.

GRAND OPENING
at 714 West Imnaha
ACROSS FROM BOB & FLOYD IN KENNEWICK
SPUDNUT DRIVE-IN
FREE
LIMIT 1
Coffee and Spudnut
● Balloons ● Puzzles
Hats During Our Opening!
LIMIT 1
FRI. & SAT., OCT. 8th & 9th
2 DAYS ONLY 9 A.M. to 6 P.M.
We will be open serving you fresh spudnuts, maple bars, twists, etc. Mon. thru Sat. 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. — Drive-up window for quick pick-up. Bob George and Ken Allen your hosts. ● Breakfasts ● Lunches.

Grand opening announcement for the new Kennewick Spudnuts from October 7, 1971

"WE ARE SUPER PROUD OF OUR SPUDNUT BURGER!"
SPUDNUT BURGER
An Indescribably Good Burger!
INCLUDES:
FRENCH FRIES
and ORANGE RUFUS .....
69c
You'll love our ORANGE RUFUS . . . mixed as an ANGELS DRINK
SPECIAL GOOD FRI., SAT., SUN. from 10:30 A.M.
USE OUR HANDY DRIVE-IN WINDOW
SPUDNUT DRIVE-IN
714 W. Columbia - Kennewick - 586-1615

The new Kennewick Spudnuts served more than just donuts; they also served hamburgers!

SPUDNUTS • FUN FOOD U S A SPUDNUTS • FUN
We wish to express our thanks to all our friends who followed our move to a new location at 130 N. 10th in Pasco. And to all of you who haven't seen our new shop, come down and take a look at our new operation. We are now OPEN 24 hours daily (except Sundays) serving breakfast, lunch and soon a special dinner menu: and always those Great Spudnuts!
Thanks Again from
Jerry, Laurel and the Bell Family
AT THE NEW . . .
SPUDNUT DRIVE-IN
TRADE MARK
CORNER OF 10th & CLARK
PASCO, WASH.

Realizing a drive-in would help business, Bell moved the Pasco Spudnut Shop once again to its final hom on the corner of 10th and Clark.

The next fall in 1972, Jerry Bell made another location move, this time relocating to the corner of 10th and Clark in Pasco. This new location would mimic what was happening in Kennewick with a drive-thru window and would also be open 24 hours a day except for Sundays. Bell added breakfast, lunch, and dinner options at the new location. Other special offerings such as Halloween party packs including Spudnuts with jugs of apple cider was another feature of his shop.

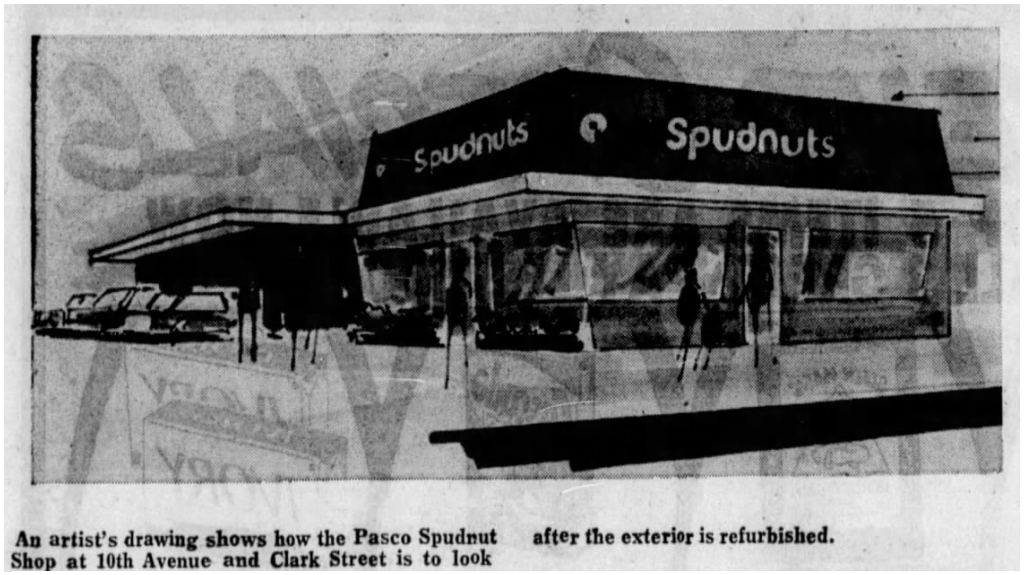
PLANNING A
HALLOWEEN PARTY?
SPUDNUTS — The delicate and delightful doughnut with the delicious "potato pastry taste." A natural for Halloween parties for young people and adults.
Call Jerry Bell's Pasco Spudnut Drive-In
547-8662
for special discount prices on party orders
Now — a real buy on APPLE CIDER with TWO DOZEN SPUDNUTS at regular price (95c per dozen) 1 gallon Apple Cider at $1.50, a total outlay of $3.40. Serve a party of eight young folks with a unique treat.
Call 547-8662
and place your order early!
PASCO SPUDNUT DRIVE-IN
130 North 10th - Pasco, Wash.

Much like the first time Spudnuts appeared on the Kennewick scene in the early 1950's, it wouldn't be long before changes were made. Three years later in November 1974, the Kennewick Spudnuts was listed for sale in the classified section of the Tri-City Herald as a "Mom and Pop Operation" that was a great buy for an ambitious couple". While there's no record if it sold or not, the Kennewick Spudnuts would only stay in business for a few more years, closing for good in 1977.

The last mention of the Kennewick Spudnut Shop was in the May 10, 1977 Tri-City Herald.

Jerry Bell would oversee a complete remodel to the exterior of his Pasco shop in early 1978 according to an article and artist's sketch in the Tri-City Herald of what the future drive-in would look like. The building would feature a mansard roof and new lettering on three sides lit at night with quartz lights. The building would also be painted gold and brown. Less than two years later and after more than 32 years in the Spudnut business, Bell retired in 1980, closing his Spudnut franchise in the process. Staying in town after retirement, Bell passed away in 2003 at the age of 85.

Already dwindling fast due to no national support from Bake-N-Serv, Spudnuts franchises were hit hard when the parent company went out of business in 1979 due to bad real estate investments in California. With no dough mix supplier, hundreds of Spudnut shops across the country closed, leaving the ones remaining to make their own Spudnut mix to keep in business. Today, there are less than 40 Spudnut shops left, with most of them being located in California.


Spudnuts
Spudnuts
An artist's drawing shows how the Pasco Spudnut Shop at 10th Avenue and Clark Street is to look after the exterior is refurbished.

This artist rendering of the Pasco Sputnuts remodel appeared in the January 13, 1978 Tr-City Herald along with a report of what was planned.

Despite the problems nationally and years of change in owners, locations, and offerings in Kennewick and Pasco, the Richland Spudnuts kept going on as if nothing was different. Barlow Ghirardo's five children all took turns working at the Spudnut Shop while in school; the shop was a true family affair. While the rest of the Ghirardo siblings eventually went onto other careers, his daughter Val Driver was drawn towards the business her father and uncle started decades earlier. After attending business college in Montana, Driver returned to work side by side with her father.

In 1981 when Ghirardo retired, Driver took over the reins of the family business. According to a June 22, 2008 article in the Herald which recognized the Richland Spudnut Shop's 60 years in business, Driver admits her father did not want his children to work the grueling 70+ hours each week schedule which also included 1 a.m. wake up calls, but Driver felt that it was worth it. "I love the people," she said. "So many people who come in think they're family."

Barlow Ghirardo would pass away in 1987 at the age of 68. Val Driver would eventually purchase the business and the legend of the Richland Spudnut Shop continued to grow. In 2008 the shop was featured on The Travel Channels show "Food Paradise". The following year the Food Network would pay Richland a visit for an episode of their popular show "Unwrapped". Alaska Governor Sarah Palin brought even more national attention to the Richland Spudnut Shop in a 2011 interview. Palin, referencing a speech by President Obama, stated the United States didn't need a "Sputnik moment" but a "Spudnut moment". The website Travelocity even named the Spudnut Shop as the best "donut" shop in 2018. When asked about this feat, Driver made sure to clarify these were not donuts, but Spudnuts!

After 53 years in the Spudnut business, Val Driver retired in 2023 and sold the business to Mike Bishop and Ryan Pierson, who had big plans for the future of Spudnuts. The pair had eyes on expanding once again across the Tri-Cities. For the first time since 1977 and 1980, the Pelton Brother's fluffy Spudnut invention would once again enter the Kennewick and Pasco markets. The Kennewick location near Kamiakin high school opened in early November 2024, while the Pasco location on Court Steet would open a week later.

While most people in the Tri-Cities are unaware this wasn't the first time Spudnuts were available somewhere other than Richland, there are some who have fond memories from their childhoods of the Kennewick and Pasco shops. Hopefully, the new locations will enjoy the same popularity as the Richland Spudnuts Shop, and the Pelton Spudnut invention from over 80 years ago experiences a reawakening.